



Profiles in Social Work

Episode 5 – Suzy Yim

Intro - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

Profile – Suzy Yim

My name is Suzy Yim and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2008.

I actually did my undergrad in science. You know, in high school I had a lot of interests that kind of pointed towards social work, but I had it ingrained in me that was going to do medicine and I wanted to be a good immigrant daughter, so I went into the field. I was very good in science. I did pretty well, but it wasn't my passion. Even throughout my undergrad I was doing a lot of social justice work on the side and it became very clear that social work was where I wanted to be. And I found myself working at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work even before I became a Master's student.

What really stood out for me was the sense of community. It was really remarkable how supportive the program was to me; maybe it's the difference between how sciences work and how social sciences work or maybe how Masters work and how undergrad programs work but they really wanted you to succeed, and that was amazing.

My official title is Knowledge Transfer Exchange Coordinator. My background is primarily in research, sexual health research, and I do knowledge transfer exchange, which is taking



research data and trying to put it into practice. There was a really large study done in Toronto on youth sexual health and we've taken all of this data and now we're trying to take that information and disseminate it in to the community in a way that makes it accessible to various stakeholders and our goal is to take this kind of research jargon and put it in a way that allows, informs policy change, informs recommendations to service providers on how to improve services, improve access to sexual health services for youth. The whole premise for the study was to let youth speak about their experiences with sexual health and the whole idea was that youth are having sex, you may not want to hear it but they are and they're not accessing sexual health care services. The issue is that there are reasons for that and there are certain communities who are not able to access it more than others and we need to kinda make changes to the healthcare systems and the services in place.

Toronto is such a diverse city but it means that there are so many pockets of people who are marginalized and who don't get access and you're kind of left out to ensure that people have a voice and I guess the success of this work is it was huge and the people who were there before me were able to go out and reach out to all these communities in a way that kind of allowed a lot of youth, like over a thousand youth to say, hey these are our experiences it was in a lot of eyes a huge success. The challenge will now be to not only let their voices be heard but actually make change.

It's already working. Right now part of the knowledge transfer exchange process is to build community partnerships. The agency I'm working for is in constant contact with these partners and we're developing resources that are gonna be disseminated into the general public and we're trying to make these resources available to policymakers, to educators, service providers, clinicians and some people have already started implementing recommendations. So with these partners, who are the front-line workers, who are already making these changes we're trying to figure out ways that we can use these findings and use their expertise to push us forward to make the youth feel like their voices have been heard and make the resources more accessible in a way that can optimize whatever resources we do have.

Despite the fact that we're one of the most diverse cities in the world a lot of our resources are pretty normalized, they're heteronormalized. A lot of resources are catered to the heterosexual white mentality and that's not the demographic of our city. The people who access resources tend to be female, they're more likely to be white. There are certain people who are more likely access services but they're not necessarily the people who are more likely to have sex and also not necessarily the people who are more likely to be at risk of acquiring infections like syphilis or chlamydia or HIV. The goal is to factor in things like the social determinants of health.



It's not just about epidemiology, it's about social epidemiology. The survey that we took looked at things like disability, substance use, other factors and they do play a role. They could have hired a researcher, they could've hired a statistician, but they, I think they hired somebody who was in social work for a reason because they could bring in that knowledge of social factors, of social epidemiology, of the social determinants of health. That kind of training actually was very beneficial to my work.

Being a social worker to me means being an advocate, being someone who stands in solidarity with others. It's very different than someone who is sympathetic and it's not just empathy, to me it's action. Most students especially the students who came straight from undergrad or who came without any practice experience, direct practice experience were very, very concerned about damaging clients, and I know I was one of them. There were many conversations between faculty and students about what it meant to be a social worker and what it meant to support people who came to see you. We can get caught up in what our roles is sometimes and being our best. The idea of saving people while it's admirable, the idea is to do our best, and to know that our best is good. Sometimes we make mistakes and it's okay to make mistakes and making mistakes is a learning experience. I made tons of them. We need to be able to forgive ourselves.

Social work is a very challenging profession. A lot of people can give a lot of themselves to the profession. Well, I think it relates to boundaries and not knowing where to draw your own boundaries. A lot of people are very passionate, they come in to social work not for the money, they come into it because they have an experience or commitments or some sort of desire to help or to advocate or maybe it's personal, something they've experienced or their family has experienced that can blur boundaries or that kind of passion can cause you to work too hard. I've seen people suffer and it's not necessarily the best thing in the long-run for one's self or for the employer even. I guess the advice would be to exercise self-care even within the program.

I didn't realize how much that I had learned in my Master's program until I had actually gone out into the workforce and I was actually applying it in daily life and, you know, not even just at work. Then when you step out of the program you realize it's actually pretty good. When you're in it you're like "oh man, not another essay!" but those essays, there are lots of them, and you keep on writing them you're like "why do I have to write so many essays? Why do I have to reflect on this?" but you realize that there is a purpose to it, but you don't realize it in the moment. You realize it later when you're working. You're like, "oh I understand now." My essay writing skills are coming in handy now that I have to write a report every three weeks. [Laughs] You really build a skill set. I can whip out a report that would've taken me days, years ago, and I



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can whip it out way faster now. I can see the difference. I'm grateful that I had a couple years of practice of writing twenty, twenty-five, whatever it was, essays or reflections or whatever they may be to have that practice and you may be cursing at the time but they're were quite necessary, so don't skip out on them.

Outro - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca